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CH'AN NEWSLETTER

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THOUGHT WITH AND WITHOUT PURPOSE

Lecture given November 20, 1983

What is meant by "using your thinking mind"? It means to use your mind to investigate, to look into, to analyze. First we must understand that thinking itself is not necessarily wrong; it is not necessarily the cause of our problems. For example, statues of Bodhisattvas and Buddhas and certain Patriarchs, especially those in the Tibetan system, often have their heads tilted to one side. This signifies thinking. Thought, therefore, is not necessarily bad.

But there is a distinction between thinking without purpose and thinking with purpose. This is the difference between Bodhisattvas and ordinary sentient beings. Bodhisattvas can engage in mental activity, but it is activity without specific purpose. Ordinary sentient beings, however, think for a purpose. When there is a specific purpose, there will be a goal or object to be accomplished. With such an object, there will be a self-center. A person who is not self-centered will have no purpose in his mind when he acts. One who is self-centered must act with a specific purpose.

The thinking of a Bodhisattva, however, arises from the state of samadhi. In samadhi the mind is unified. There is no self-centeredness; because to have a sense of self implies that there is a self separate from the object of one's thinking. When the mind is in that state two thoughts already exist: the self and that self's thinking. With two thoughts, one cannot be completely unified, and one cannot be in a state of samadhi. When a Bodhisattva has no such self-centeredness, when he can remain in samadhi, it is possible for him to think without purpose, without constructs. Does this kind of thinking still function as regular thought? Definitely. But the thinking of a Bodhisattva is more open, clearer, and more profound.

It is not necessary for Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to think. They do think, however, when they practice the Dharma or while they help others. Thinking is not really necessary for the Buddhas, manifested in the Dharma body (the Dharmakaya). But in

the Incarnation body (the Nirmanakhaya), the body that is involved in helping all living beings, the Buddhas must often engage in thinking. Engage in what kind of thinking? That which is similar to our human thinking. The only difference is that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas do not have specific objects associated with their actions, and they do not have a sense of self when they perform these actions. Ordinary sentient beings, despite what they may say or believe, always have a sense of self.

It is true that we are not at the stage where we can function without a sense of self, or a sense of purpose. Nevertheless, it is beneficial and important that we understand that such a state exists. This understanding is especially important in our daily activities, when we are prey to a sense of gain and loss, when our sense of self and our environment come into conflict. At such times it is important that we remind ourselves of the 'asamskrta' state, the state when we act without purpose. We will not be able to do this, but nonetheless, we should learn to do so. As we are Buddhists, we should learn from the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. We are not Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, but we should strive in that direction. Whenever conflicts arise -- between self and others or self and the environment -- we can reflect on our mental attitude. We must realize that we are caught up in our sense of self and our sense of purpose. If we can move towards a purposeless, selfless mentality, then all of these conflicts will be resolved.

'Samskrita' thinking, purposeful thinking, as we have seen, always involves a sense of self. When there is a sense of self, whatever we encounter will be in the realm of the six kinds of sense data, because these data are relative to the sense of self. We can also group the six kinds of sense data into the internal and external. The internal comprise our own bodies; and the external, our environment.

The six kinds of sense data are material. Can our thoughts be separate from material things? Even if we think in fairly abstract concepts, we still have to use and manipulate symbols. These symbols are derived from material things. That is, without reference to material things, our minds cannot move, we cannot engage in any thinking whatsoever.

If we were to say that we must have material things in order to think and that spirit can only be reached through thought, we would be led to purely materialistic conclusions. But Buddhist sutras do not lead us towards a materialistic point of view. The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment shows that thinking arises only when our mind interacts with the six kinds of sense data. We can turn this around and say that without the functioning of the mind there would be no such experience of the six kinds of sense data.

For example, if you are in a sound, dreamless sleep, what exists in the world? It can be said that nothing exists. By the same token, when the mind is completely dull, nothing exists because the mind is unaware of any material thing. On the other hand, when the mind is completely clear and most acute, once again, it is unaware of the material world. Thus in these two opposing states -- when the mind is extremely clear or extremely dull -- there will be no awareness of the material world. The existence of ordinary sense data, ordinary material things, is

present only when the mind is in its ordinary state, not when the mind is in the extreme state of either clarity or dullness.

This line of reasoning leads to pure mentalism: material things exist only when the mind is moving, only when the mind is aware of material things. When the mind lacks such awareness, material things cannot be said to exist. So the previous reasoning has led us to the opposite of materialism. Are we to say that the Buddhist sutras lead us to pure idealism or mentalism?

The mind can function only when it is interacting with material objects. Material things exist only when they are experienced by the mind. Thus, neither material things nor the mind really exists. If material things had real existence, they would not have to depend on the mind's awareness to experience them, and if the mind had real existence, its functioning would depend on the material world.

Either case, the mind's existence dependent on the material or the material dependent on the mind, can be compared to flowers in the air. What does this refer to? It refers to people who have something wrong with their eyes. They cannot see clearly; they experience optical illusions. They may believe that they see flowers in they sky -- not in the earth, not in the soil, but somehow the flowers are just floating in the sky. The flowers have no real substance. Likewise, the mind and material things have no real existence. Thus we can reject both idealism and materialism.

Our mind is an illusion; it has no real substance. If we were to use the self-centered thinking of such an illusory mind to investigate the nature of a Buddha or what Buddhahood is, it would be quite impossible. It would be like seeing flowers in the sky. We would begin with an illusion. We might then go a step further and say that we see the flowers blosssom and bear fruit. The fruit that comes from the flowers cannot have more substance, more reality, than the flowers themselves. Therefore it is futile to try to probe the depth of Buddhahood with such self-centered thinking, which is illusory and false in and of itself.

We ordinary sentient beings would like to reach Buddhahood; we would like to know what Buddhas are. Unfortunately, we go after Buddhahood with a self-centered attitude. We would all like to reach Buddhahood because it would mean that we could achieve complete enlightenment. If can become Buddhas, it would be the best thing that could ever happen to us. But if we do no drop our imagination and our self-centered attitude, it will be impossible to reach Buddhahood.

It is not easy to let go of these things. It is easier for practitioners to summon up extraordinary effort for a short period of time, but it is much more difficult to persist in practice for a long period. It is possible for someone to summon up great courage, determination, and extraordinary effort for a short period, because of the desire to get a specific result; we are willing to go through untold suffering to reach our goal. However, after a short time, we may realize that the goal of practice is not so easily accomplished, let alone the realization of Buddhahood. Even ridding oneself of vexations is not easy.

Many people seem to develop more vexations after they begin to practice than they had before they started. At this point they may feel, "I am not ready to practice. Let me quit for a while; when I am ready I will come back again." I have met quite a number of such people. These people are willing to put forth a great deal of effort at first, but they often slacken their efforts after a short period and turn away from the path.

Thus, when we practice, we should not try to go after anything. The more that we try to go after anything -- enlightenment, Buddhahood -- the further we draw away from Buddhahood, and the more we begin to live in our imagination. No doubt, we practice to cut off our vexations and to reach liberation, but when we practice, we should maintain a calm and stable attitude and follow the teachings of Buddha. We should not concern ourselves with the progress we make or the vexations we have. Free of such concerns, our vexations will lessen, and we will make progress naturally, and we will be unaware of our progress. If we are anxious about our progress, disappointment is likely, and we may become disillusioned and eventually turn away from practice.

Only when we are free from thought with purpose and our self-centered minds have disappeared will it then be possible for us to reach Buddhahood and experience complete enlightenment.

NEWS ITEMS

Rev. Ren-chun lectured at the Ch'an Center on February 26. He spoke on "The Proper Attitude Towards Practice."

Shih-fu was interviewed in Taiwan by a German TV station.

The most recent Taiwan retreat had 60 participants.

Shih-fu will be coming back at the end of April.

Two retreats are scheduled:

May 28 - June 8, A two-week retreat

June 29 - July 6, A one-week retreat

The cost for retreats is \$100 per week.

The Buddha's Birthday ceremony will be held on May 13th.

ALL ARE WELCOME



CH'AN CENTER ACTIVITIES

SUNDAY OPEN HOUSE

(9-11 AM) Meditation (11-12 AM) Chanting Buddhist Sutras and mid-day offering
(12:00) Vegetarian Lunch (\$2.00 donation) (1:00) Lecture by Master Sheng-Yen or
discussion group (2:30) Meditation (4:30) Evening Service

TUESDAY

Group meditation: 7:30 -9:15 P.M.

ONE-DAY SITTING

Held first weekend of each month, from 8 PM Friday to 9 PM Saturday. \$15.00



The maintenance of our center and its activities depend upon contributions from members and friends. If you would like to help support us, any effort will be greatly appreciated. Those interested in offering time and labor may call the center at (212) 592-6593. Anyone who may wish to contribute financially, please make your check payable to the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture, and mail to the address given below. Your donation is tax-deductible.

Of course, we encourage everyone to visit and participate in our activities.

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